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ABSTRACT

Substantial evidence exists in both popular and professional literature which suggests that some adults, male and female, will experience what has been variously labeled as a "mid-life crisis" or "mid-life depression." Research provides evidence that the lifespan can be conceptualized as a series of transitions from one status or situation to another. Many adults complete these transitions with a minimum of distress; others experience acute discomfort. A number of investigators have proposed explanations of the dynamics of adult transitions, although perhaps Levinson has presented the most elaborate description of adult psychosocial development, derived from research with forty men aged between thirty-five and forty-five during a nine-year period. In his view, adulthood can be visualized as a series of relatively stable life structures followed by transition periods leading to new structures. Both the individual life structure and the transitions to new structures may precipitate stress response. The research of Levinson and others suggests implications for education. These include some of the following: reduced teacher mobility, coupled with the difficulty of teaching today, can lead to teacher anxiety, guilt, and job disatisfaction; the advancing mean age of teachers may present problems in the area of teacher-student relationships; and school curricula should include content about adulthood and coping strategies for managing potential crisis situations. (JH)

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Mid-Life Transitions and Education

by

Malcolm A. Lowther

The notion of a crisis at mid-life, which has been receiving much publicity - both serious and jocular - recently became fodder for the journalist Gerald Nachman. At the age of thirty-nine, he wryly noted in a recent Newsweek column entitled "The Menopause That Refreshes," his mid-life crisis may be that he will not have one, even though he had been assured by a psychiatrist friend that "Many men are late bloomers."

Although the "crisis" is often viewed by such journalists and others as a tired joke, substantial evidence exists in both the popular and professional literature which suggests that some adults, male and female, will experience what has been variously labeled as a "mid-life crisis," or "mid-life depression". Some of us may have evidence for such a phenomenon drawn from our personal lives. It is my intention in this article to examine that concept in more detail and to speculate on its implications for teaching.

Particularly graphic descriptions of persons experiencing crisis at mid-life can be found in popular fiction and Passages, by Gail Sheehy, is illustrative of the gowing self-help literature on the topic.

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The technical literature, although not voluminous, is growing, with the following papers and books representing a cross-section of the psychological literature: Lowenthal, Thurnher, Chiriboga (1975); Soddy (1967); Neugarten (1968); Brim (1976); Gould (1972); Jacques (1965); Vaillant and McArthur (1972); and Levinson (1974, 1976, 1977).

Adult Mid-Life Dynamics

Let me summarize briefly the literature on the mid-life crisis and then describe in more detail the work of Prof. Daniel Levinson of Yale University. First, though, a caveat: The fact that much of the research has focused on white middle-aged males and females has created the usual problem of generalizing to other populations.

Rather than referring directly to a mid-life crisis, much of the literature focuses on life transitions; that is, the movement from one status or role to another. Research on life transitions is not unique, but it is only recently that psychologists and educators have investigated adult transitions. The transition from youth to adulthood, for example, has received much recent attention, as have transitions occurring in later adulthood. Developmental in character, the research provides evidence that the lifespan can be conceptualized as a series of transitions from one status or situation to another. Although collected for the most part from children and adolescents, the

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evidence has demonstrated that status passage and similar transitions can be emotionally hazardous undertakings, so much so that professional counseling is often utilized to assist the passage.

Many adults complete life's transitions with a minimum of distress; others experience acute discomfort. The literature suggests the following scenario for persons in mid-life. They will experience a number of transitions precipitated in part by a combination of physiological, psychological, and sociological events. For some males, the transition period may be accompanied by anxiety, depression, self-doubt, job dissatisfaction, changes in aspirations, alcoholism, divorce, health problems, and similar indicators of stress situations. Certain persons at mid-life may thus experience life transitions as periods of considerable conflict which may or may not be managed successfully. The point is that all of us will be confronted with life transitions which possess the capabilitiy of precipitating a crisis and that some of us will possess more effective coping skills for crisis management. An illustration of a common transition is the so-called "empty-nest" syndrome, when a middle-aged woman is faced with her children's departure from home.

Transition Dynamics

A number of investigators have proposed explanations of the dynamics of adult transitions, although perhaps Levinson

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has presented the most elaborate description of adult psychosocial development, developed from research with forty men aged 35-45 during a nine year period. Biography and interview were his primary research methods, techniques which permitted Levinson and his group to develop detailed life histories of each participant with primary focus on the late adolescent and middle adult years. The analysis of these life histories, supplemented by studies of autobiography and fiction, has yielded a provocative set of concepts, with specific emphasis on what Levinson labels the "mid-life transition," a period lasting roughly from the age of 40 to 45.

In essence, Levinson argues that each male fashions an "individual life structure" which represents the "patterning or design of the individual life at a given time." The adult life cycle can thus be seen as a process involving the development, stabilization, and termination of a series of age-linked individual life structures. For example, he labels the first adult life structure as "Getting Into the Adult World," a period extending from the age of 22 to 28; this is followed by the "Age Thirty Transition," which culminates in the second structure, "Settling Down," beginning at about 32 or 33 and lasting until age 39 or 40. The purpose of these transitions is to terminate a life structure that has become inadequate and to begin the development of a new structure. The "mid-life transition" begins at age 40 and leads to a new structure called "Getting Into Middle Adulthood." According to Levinson,

all transition periods involve crisis, but the mid-life transition, perhaps corresponding to the term "mid-life crisis," is a period evoking "tumultuous struggles within the self and the external world," and it may be a "time of moderate or severe crisis."

He emphasizes that undergoing transition is a normal life task; yet the effort to terminate an old structure and develop a new one may initiate much anxiety and guilt. Some persons are more successful than others in evolving a satisfactory life structure at mid-life. Levinson speculates that the mid-life transition will be followed by two others, the "Age 50 Transition" and the "Late Adult Transition." In his view, adulthood can be visualized as a series of relatively stable life structures followed by transition periods leading to new structures. As already pointed out, both the individual life structure and the transitions to new structures may precipitate stress responses. Although this brief summary of Levinson's work in no way does justice to its richness, the summary does suggest implications for teaching.

Educational Implications

One way of examining the educational implications of research about adult transitions is to look at the interaction of this information with three current trends in elementary and secondary education: (1) reduced mobility of teachers; (2) increased difficulty of teaching; and (3) the advancing average age of teachers.

Teachers today have lost much of their mobility to move from district to district or even from school to school within a district. As one of my graduate students put it in class recently, many teachers are now entrenched in their original teaching position with the same courses and even the same room. The reduction of both vertical and horizontal mobility is certain to have an impact on the teacher's degree of satisfaction with his/her life structure. That factor coupled with the extreme difficulty of teaching today can lead to further teacher anxiety, guilt and job dissatisfaction.

Although I do not have research evidence at hand, I know that fewer newly prepared teachers are being employed today in teaching, one consequence of which is a corresponding increase in the mean age of teachers. When teachers are laid off, it is the younger ones who lose their positions first. A recent story in the New York Times by Ferretti (1976) emphasizes these points: "Three years ago the average age of a New York City public school teacher was 28 years. Today it is 41." Social and economic factors will, no doubt, continue to push up the mean age of teachers.

These factors coupled with interpretations such as Brim's and Levinson's and my own judgment, suggest the following observations about mid-life adulthood:

-Many males and females at mid-life will undergo significant personality changes, as well as experience substantial conflict or crisis.

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-The crisis will be experienced by individuals with varying degrees of intensity. Barron (1963) suggests that the more creative the person, the more intense the feelings.

-The intensity of the response to mid-life transition may increase as a function of the number of coping demands required. Attempts at transition management may precipitate increased needs for coping skills. One outcome of a traumatic transition period or unsatisfactory life structure is that it spills into all life roles, flooding the total life of the individual.

-Causal processes for alternating periods of stability and instability are not well understood. However, if crises are related to age comparisons, that is generational differences, then individuals working with a variety of age groups may well experience the mid-life transition more deeply than others and find it lasting longer and more difficult to manage. It is possible, too, that these individuals may be more dissatisfied with their existing life structures.

-Teachers, by the nature of their occupation, have daily access to youth. In a youth-centered culture this observation takes an added importance. Effective teaching too frequently requires the development of a relationship characterized, in part, by expressions of affect designed to facilitate learning. Thus, teachers -

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in contrast to businessmen, for example - have no difficulty in developing affective relationships with youth. An important outcome for teachers is that the use of age as a basis for the comparison of self with others or as an indicator of life satisfaction may be sharpened or intensified by such contact.

-Students, then, may not only find the quality of instruction declining but also teachers' perceptions toward them changing. It is possible that some teachers may attempt to work out their conflicts through the exploitation of students.

-Some teachers will possess more effective coping skills than others for managing transitions, in particular, the mid-life transition. It is encouraging to note that skill needs can be anticipated and such skills acquired and perfected through education and other kinds of interventions. Perhaps in-service education programs could assist in this area.

-School curricula should include content about adulthood and coping strategies for managing potential crisis situations. In providing students with this orientation, it should be emphasized that adulthood does not necessarily mean stability but that, on the contrary, it can be a period of considerable change.

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